Beach Center on Disability
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Research Highlights

Topic: Disability Policy

Sailor, W., & Stowe, M. (2003). The relationship of inquiry to public policy. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 28*(3), 148-152.

BOTTOM LINE

Public policy has traditionally been informed by inquiry. Recently the relationship of policy and inquiry has undergone dramatic change with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. NCLB legislation made inquiry into education part of the law. NCLB defines the terms of inquiry and limits the forms of inquiry used in creating policy. This article examines expert opinion on the evolving relationship between "evidence," inquiry, and public policy.

KEY FINDINGS

- Inquiry is pragmatic in American culture. Our quest for knowledge is not a search for facts but for what makes life better.
- How and why we pursue systematic inquiry is affected by our view of "reality."
- One method of understanding reality is through interpretation, subject to social construction (constructivism). So-called "qualitative" research methods are consistent with this epistemology.
- Another method of understanding reality is measuring social and personal phenomena, which is objective (positivism). Quantitative, empirical-experimental research derives from positivism.
- Pragmatism dictates the use of different forms of inquiry. The two methods of inquiry (qualitative and quantitative) have long been in conflict. But as policy-makers increasingly equate science with scientific investigation, they begin to indicate a preference for quantitative methods. However, rigorous methodological controls are required as much for qualitative as quantitative inquiry.

KEY FINDINGS cont.

- NCLB legislation not only mandates scientifically based research but also limits that research to inquiry anchored in a positivist tradition. Unfortunately, such limitations reduce the knowledge base needed for effective educational practice.

- Certain forms of inquiry (such as qualitative) have been removed from the realm of educational research. The research community, therefore, may be influenced to select only those questions that can be easily addressed by quantitative methods, limiting other types of questions that might be asked.

- The stance toward inquiry adopted by NCLB assumes that it is the failure of educational research to inform policy and practice to achieve better outcomes. NCLB also assumes that this failure has been caused, at least in part, because the research community has not adopted quantitative inquiry.

- Another assumption of NCLB is that the "gold standard" of research in the medical community, randomized clinical trials, should be the same in educational research. This assumption is arguable, given the differences between medical and educational research.

- In medical research, external variables that may affect a target variable are fairly easy to isolate and control in the relatively closed system of the human body. Isolating external variables in educational research is more challenging due to legal, cultural, socioeconomic, biological, interpersonal, and individual factors.

- Medical research relies on a more established literature base formed over almost a century of funding unmatched by that allocated to educational research.

- If policy makers want to address problems in educational research, they might do better to look for guidance among the long-established standards of inquiry with which they are familiar, such as the U.S. court system. Weight of evidence is a matter left to a jury, analogous to peer-reviewed grant funding and publications.

- NCLB sacrifices the flexibility of researchers yet still fails to hold schools accountable for "scientifically proven" educational interventions because it provides no recourse for assessing the rigor in the research used to support interventions.

METHOD

- The article reflects expert opinion gathered through the historical research and educational experience of the authors.

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